

throughout the nation as the Latino population continues to grow beyond California.

### Conclusion

Mexican migration to the United States is both a new and an old phenomenon entrenched in a long relationship between the United States and Mexico. Contemporary middle-class Mexican Americans' mobility pathways and their experiences in the American middle class are embedded in the sociohistorical context of Mexican migration. As we shall see, the ancestral roots of some of today's middle-class Mexican Americans extend deep into American soil, from those who trace their ancestry to California's Spanish ranchos to those whose grandparents migrated during the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century. Others are the children of braceros, legal labor migrants, or unauthorized migrants who eventually garnered legal status under the "baby clause," or IRCA. Regardless of the length of its roots in the United States, the Mexican-origin population in the United States has a social, economic, and political history that is riddled with conflict and hostility but that also contains tenuous triumphs that have advanced its entry into the middle class, such as post-World War II prosperity, the civil rights movement, and immigration policy.

## 3 Barrios to Burbs: Divergent Class Backgrounds and Pathways into the Middle Class

*Growing up it was poverty. My parents couldn't afford a house. We'd sleep at the swap meets. . . . They had no idea about how to apply for college and couldn't afford it anyway.*

—Lorenzo, second generation, writer

*My parents did very well. My parents pretty much paid for undergrad and for graduate school they helped with a lot of it. . . . They've always given me stuff. When it came to graduate school I only had to take out one year of loans and that was like thirty grand that I saved.*

—Karina, second generation, human resources

BRENDA GUERRERO GENTLY PLACED HER oversized vanilla latte on the wooden table, leaned toward me, and lowered her voice so that the patrons of the coffee shop would not be able to discern her words. "When I was growing up . . . we were really poor. We lived in a garage," she whispered. Brenda's parents, both from the same small rancho in Zacatecas, Mexico, have worked in low-level manufacturing jobs for the last thirty years. Her father is a machine operator and her mother assembles parts, day after day. Brenda's father never went to school and her mother only made it to the sixth grade in Mexico.

Traditional models of status attainment assert that the occupational and educational status of parents determines the educational attainment and socioeconomic status of their children (Blau and Duncan 1967). Others have argued that it is not only the individual attributes of parents that determine one's position in America but also the status of groups, such as whether particular groups face barriers to social mobility due to racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination (Horan 1978; Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2000; Zhou et al. 2008). Some emphasize that the characteristics of social institutions, such as subpar schools in segregated neighborhoods or racialization in

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Barrio to  
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Class

2012

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schools, make entry into college difficult or nearly impossible, thereby perpetuating racial inequalities in socioeconomic status (Bowles and Gintis 1977; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Waters 1999). The segmented assimilation model combines the individual attributes of parents laid out in the status attainment model with opportunity structures and the larger contexts of reception and would predict that Brenda will likely follow a pathway of downward, or stagnated, assimilation due to her parents' low levels of human and social capital and the negative context of reception that Mexican Americans experience in the United States. Taken together, we might expect that Brenda, a second-generation Mexican American who was raised in a poor, inner-city community with parents who have extremely low levels of education and human capital and who toil in low-wage and low-status jobs, would not move beyond the social status of her parents. Yet Brenda graduated from a top-tier high school at the top of her class, attended a prestigious women's liberal arts college and law school, and now works as a high-powered attorney. While scholars are concerned that Mexican Americans will attain only modest gains in socioeconomic attainment over the generations, the achievements of Brenda, and of many others I studied, call into question the widespread fear that Mexican Americans are overwhelmingly headed for downward mobility and not assimilating into the middle class.

Like nearly all in this study, Brenda's parents migrated to the United States to "provide a better life, better opportunities" for their children. Brenda was raised in a "bad" neighborhood of Santa Ana that was ruled by gangs, something she feels she could have easily fallen into if not for her identification as "gifted" in second grade. In fourth grade Brenda was tracked into GATE, the California Department of Education's Gifted and Talented Program, which places elementary school and junior high school children in "differentiated" classes with accelerated learning, challenging and advanced coursework, access to the best teachers, individualized attention, and extensive opportunities to participate in extracurricular academic activities, such as academic decathlons and educational field trips.<sup>1</sup>

Brenda's entry into GATE shielded her from attending the subpar schools in her neighborhood during her elementary school years. Her parents could not afford private school tuition, so she enrolled in a Santa Ana high school, where 98 percent of the students are of Latino origin and where a high proportion, 80 percent, qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (FRL), a variable that is used to measure economic disadvantage (Stem et al. 2008). Despite the

lower socioeconomic status of the high school, Brenda's pathway to educational achievement had been set in motion long before, when she was identified as a gifted child in elementary school. Because she was a GATE student, she was tracked into honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school, where she completed rigorous college preparatory coursework, engaged with teachers who expected she would apply to college, and received a constant stream of information on how to navigate the college application process. That Brenda even graduated high school was a major advancement in intergenerational mobility relative to her parents and a meaningful achievement within the extended family.

Brenda was awarded a scholarship at a women's liberal arts college in Southern California, where she excelled, but where she also felt out of place due to her poor background and ethnicity. While Brenda's classmates were traipsing off to ski glamorous Vail and Whistler over the winter holiday, she returned home to Santa Ana to work full-time to pay the balance on her tuition bill that was not covered by the generous scholarship she received. Her feelings of inferiority were exacerbated when she realized that although she had successfully completed college preparatory coursework in high school, her education and level of preparation were no match for those of her mostly white peers, many of whom attended private high schools or schools in upper-middle-class neighborhoods. As Brenda recalled,

The level of preparedness . . . I remember sitting in freshman writing and the words these women would use, I would write them down, look them up later. They were so above and beyond what high school had provided me with, you know. I knew the level of education that I had received wasn't great, I mean it wasn't bad but I didn't realize how deficient it was until then.

Despite feeling out of place, Brenda worked diligently in college to prove her academic chops and eventually graduated from a top-ranked California law school. Looking back, Brenda feels that being identified as gifted and tracked into GATE was the crucial mechanism that shaped her education and occupational ascent. She contrasted her experience to that of her younger brother, Ben, who was labeled as a "troublemaker" and who was encouraged to enroll in trade school rather than college.

I was just lucky. . . . I think that the early channeling helped and I know that my brother was tracked as a troublemaker early on and it produced different

outcomes. He didn't do anything for a while after graduation and now he's found an outlet for his creative energy [he's now in junior college] but he got tracked as a bad kid and there you go. I'm really not that smart.

Brenda also feels that "if the stars would have aligned differently" she could have been "one of those people" who does not achieve educational and occupational mobility. Not only were GATE and AP classes critical forces that fashioned a social structure for academic achievement; early educational tracking was also critical because it connected her with a cosseted peer group that was not involved in gangs or drugs:

I grew up in Central Santa Ana and I was a straight edge<sup>3</sup> because I knew that should I fall into that [gangs and drugs], it was so easy and it was there and so easy to fall into that, there is no way that I could have gone to college if I would have chosen that lifestyle. . . . I just got lucky. I got so lucky that the people close around me didn't fall into that. That we kept each other safe you know, just as easily you could make friends with X or Y and fall into that. I got lucky; I didn't fall into that and was identified as gifted.

Brenda has come a long way from living in a ramshackle garage in a "bad" area of Santa Ana, California. She now leases a large home in Santa Ana's most exclusive, and mostly white, neighborhood. She has traveled abroad and is carrying an oversized designer purse on her shoulder. A gold-folied law degree from a prestigious university proudly hangs on her office wall, she works at an esteemed law firm, and in stark contrast to her parents' low wages, Brenda and her husband (who is half White and half Latino) together bring home more than \$100,000 a year.

As Brenda's narrative illustrates, some middle-class Mexican Americans grow up impoverished in inner-city neighborhoods and achieve extreme rates of educational, occupational, residential, and financial mobility relative to their parents. Educational tracking buffers them from the deleterious conditions of the inner city, and as I will show, outside programs, along with mentors, set them on a path to educational achievement by providing them with the cultural and social capital that low-income families lack (Gandara 1995; Larcu 2003; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009; R. C. Smith 2008; Zhou et al. 2008).

Whereas some middle-class Mexican Americans grow up poor, others have childhoods that are cloaked in middle-class privilege. Parcel pathways to middle-class status differ by generation. The second generation raised in

middle-class households generally has immigrant parents with low levels of education who forged a pathway into the middle class through high-paying jobs or business ownership. Third- and fourth-generation Mexican Americans raised in middle-class households are more likely to have parents with college degrees and professional occupations and have replicated the class status of their parents as the status attainment model suggests. Regardless of generation, those raised in middle-class households reap the benefits that accompany having parents who make stable middle-class incomes. In addition to more financial resources, these benefits include living in middle-class neighborhoods and having access to high-quality schools, which provide youth with access to middle-class cultural capital.

One important mechanism that promotes social mobility into the middle class is parental legal status. The second generation who grew up middle class have parents who either migrated with legal status or were able to regularize their status soon after migrating to the United States. In contrast, many of the 1.5 and second generation who were raised in poor households have parents who were unauthorized for much of their childhood and adolescence, often until the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which offered legal status to nearly two million unauthorized immigrants who had lived and worked in the United States since 1982 (Bean and Stevens 2003). Recent research demonstrates that legal status has important implications for the social mobility of the children of immigrants, whose educational and occupational trajectories are tied to parental citizenship status (Bean et al. 2007, 2011; Zhou et al. 2008).

Like Brenda, Karina Martínez's parents also have very low levels of education. Both her mother and father only completed the third grade in Mexico. However, while Brenda's family lived in a garage in a low-income community, Karina's family lived in a white middle-class neighborhood of Los Angeles. Karina's parents migrated to the United States separately in the early 1970s to work in the fields of Central California. Karina's father migrated with a tourist visa that he overstayed. When he was caught working without the proper documentation, he was promptly deported to Tijuana. However, Mr. Martínez immediately returned to the United States on another tourist visa, upon which he met Karina's mother, who had crossed the U.S. border with the help of a coyote, a hired guide who helps smuggle unauthorized migrants cross the border by evading the Border Patrol (Cornelius 2001). Karina's father overstayed his tourist visa again, and both parents were unauthorized for several years and worked in low-wage jobs. When Karina's older sister was born on U.S. soil,

her parents applied for and were given a visa and "a place in line" to apply a legal residency (which they eventually obtained) under the baby clause, discussed in Chapter 2, because they had a native-born child. Now armed with a Social Security card, Karina's father moved out of low-wage agricultural work and obtained a job at a manufacturing plant that paid a living wage and also gave employees profit-sharing opportunities, which is an arrangement where companies give employees a percentage of their yearly profits that grow tax deferred until their withdrawal upon retirement or when an employee leaves the company. Her father's salary, large yearly bonuses, overtime pay, and wages from her mother's thriving home-based Tupperware and Avon businesses provided the family with the financial means to purchase several rental properties, adding even more income to the family treasury. Their financial stability also allowed the Martinez family to settle in a largely white middle-class neighborhood by the time their oldest daughter entered elementary school and to afford private tuition at elementary and junior high schools. As Karina explained,

For my parents, education was very important. They just thought that we would get a better education at private school. Their philosophy was to move to nice areas; we lived in nice areas where a lot of Americans, the white kids, lived, because they are all going to go to college and go to school. So fortunately they were able to afford to live in nice areas. But that was their thinking. We will pay in time in these areas and there will be no other Latinos and we will be the little minority and that was our story throughout private school and high school. If they live in this area, they will go to college and have good friends, friends who have professional parents and all that.

After working at the manufacturing plant for more than a decade, Karina's father decided to cash out the \$150,000 he had accumulated through the company's profit-sharing plan. He invested half of his shares in a retirement fund, and he used the other half as seed money to start a construction company, Martinez Construction. The construction company quickly became a financial success. By this time, the Martinez family was living in an upper middle-class master-planned Orange County community, and Karina was attending an award-winning "California Distinguished" public high school. Karina always knew that she was going to college, not only because it was expected of her but also because that is what all of her middle-class friends were doing. And unlike those who were raised in poor households, Karina easily transformed her college aspirations into a reality, as she always knew that her parents could

afford to pay her college tuition. Karina holds a bachelor's degree from a competitive California state university and a master's degree from Stanford University and now works in human resources. Unlike Brenda, who felt alienated from her white middle-class counterparts in college, Karina never felt out of place. Her class background provided her with middle-class cultural capital derived from a private school education and growing up in a white middle-class neighborhood that allows her to easily cross boundaries with middle-class whites (Bourdieu 1991), a finding that will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5. Not surprisingly, Karina's sisters have also earned master's degrees from elite universities and work in white-collar jobs.

As Karina's case illustrates, legal status allows those who live and work on the margins of society to secure stable and relatively high paying jobs, resulting in greater familial financial stability that translates into cumulative educational and social advantages for children. Living in a white middle-class neighborhood, having middle-class friends, and attending a private school provided the Martinez sisters with professional role models and access to middle-class social capital (contacts in networks that can lead to personal or professional gains) and cultural capital (specialized or insider knowledge stemming from elite classes) that their parents could not provide (Bourdieu 1977, 1991; Coleman 1990; DiMaggio 1982; Portes 1998). Movement into white middle-class neighborhoods accelerates acculturation and incorporation into white middle-class culture, whether or not this is the intended goal (Alba and Nee 2003).

Both Brenda's and Karina's parents wanted their children to obtain a college education, and both Brenda and Karina achieved remarkable levels of educational mobility relative to those of their parents. However, the two women's mobility experiences are embedded in different class contexts. Brenda's story of upward mobility is particularly remarkable, especially considering her parents' low-wage and dead-end jobs, the inner-city neighborhood in which she was raised, and the subpar high school she attended. Her identification as gifted and her tracking into GATE were an important mechanism that set her on a path to educational and occupational success. Educational tracking helped her build the social capital that could be parlayed into a college education, something her younger brother was unable to use to his advantage because he was labeled a troublemaker and was not placed on the gifted track. What is telling about Brenda's case is that many of those who were raised in poor households credit their high levels of educational attainment with the good fortune or "luck" of being tracked into GATE or AP classes, or, as we shall see, coming into contact

with a mentor—sometimes a sibling, community member, or their parents' Anglo employers, who guide their education and their careers. Research has demonstrated that Mexican Americans from low-income backgrounds tend to have less access to financial, cultural, and social capital than other racial or ethnic groups have and that early educational tracking, outside programs that serve low-income minorities, and mentors are critical mechanisms that fill these capital gaps (Gandara 1995; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009; R. C. Smith 2008; Zhou et al. 2008). Although Karina's parents also have low levels of education, her father's opportunity to regularize his legal status and find employment in a stable and relatively high-paying job led to cumulative advantages that greatly benefited Karina and her sisters. The family moved into a middle-class neighborhood and the sisters attended private schools, both of which provided Karina with constant access to middle-class cultural and social capital through her school and peer networks.

Brenda's and Karina's divergent class backgrounds are characteristic of the Mexican American middle class in Southern California. Some affluent Mexican Americans grow up poor while others grow up middle class, a within-group difference that is missed in large-scale survey research. Scholars assume that those who achieve middle-class status follow a path of straight-line assimilation into the white middle-class "mainstream," where their ethnicity becomes inconsequential to their further upward mobility, where boundaries between Mexican Americans and whites are blurred, and where ties to the immigrant ethnic community are severed. However, the story of the Mexican American middle class is more than just a tale of straight-line assimilation into the white middle class, especially because many middle-class Mexican Americans grow up poor, like Brenda, and retain extensive ties to impoverished parents and needy relatives, making them very different from their white middle-class counterparts. These differences in class backgrounds bear heavily on the lived experiences of Mexican Americans and shape their incorporation trajectories.

#### Divergent Class Backgrounds

Middle-class Mexican Americans who grew up disadvantaged explained in vivid detail the poor communities in which they were raised. Some lived in neighborhoods riddled with violence and walked through gang territory to get to school. Their descriptions of life in such neighborhoods contrast sharply with the gated communities and large tract homes with perfectly manicured lawns

we interviewed them. As we sat in overstuffed leather chairs in beautifully decorated living rooms or in kitchens with gleaming granite countertops and stainless steel appliances, several respondents broke down in tears when they recalled the abject poverty in which they were raised. One 1.5-generation respondent wept over the wave of shame she feels when she remembers standing in line for a free lunch at school, sometimes the largest meal of her day. A few respondents lived in garages or in homes with multiple families for a portion of their youth, several spoke of how their parents rented rooms to a constant stream of migrant workers to make ends meet, three respondents claimed they "ate beans for dinner every night," and the majority shopped at thrift stores for clothing and shoes or relied on "handouts" from local churches or social organizations. Andrea, a second-generation Mexican American who lacks a college degree but forged a pathway into the middle class through entrepreneurship, explained,

I grew up in the second poorest city in the nation, in Cudahy, California. Born to immigrant parents. My father came to the United States seeking a better opportunity, you know, that American dream. He worked as a machinist, really hard labor. He would come home and his hands would really hurt. We couldn't afford Disneyland or anything. The first two of us grew up with secondhand clothes and shoes—thrift stores. And they used to take us to the park a lot [because it was free].

Similarly, Pablo Guzman, a second-generation Mexican American who works as a nurse, grew up in Lincoln Heights, a neighborhood in East Los Angeles where everyone was "Latino, Latino, Latino" and where "graffiti was everywhere and people [were] getting shot." Pablo's parents obtained legal status after the 1986 amnesty. His mother cleans hotel rooms and his father, now deceased, was a low-wage laborer. When I asked Pablo to characterize his socioeconomic background, he replied,

Low income and below poverty line.

JAV: Why do you say that?

A: Because we didn't have the things that we needed sometimes for school or like clothes. I mean we had some types of food and we were fed, but basically it was rice and beans. It wasn't as bad as some people have it in the boomies if you know what I mean, but below poverty level. My dad never paid taxes. He never made enough money. A lot of it was cash. My mom too, I don't think she got paid much.

Growing up poor is a memory that never fades and is a critical factor that shapes their social identity as middle-class Mexican Americans, even among those who are further from the immigrant generation. When I asked Isabel, a third-generation Mexican American with a degree from Harvard University, to describe her class background, her eyes welled up with tears and she replied, "Poor."

JAV: You say that you were poor. What do you mean by that?

A: Oh definitely. I mean now as an adult I know the technical version of poor. I would say my family definitely lived below the poverty line. As a child I knew I was poor because there were so many things that my parents had to say no to us and that was because of money. But all my friends were doing it so they had the money. I know that my parents would never say no to us because they didn't love us or because they didn't want us to understand that not having money was not acceptable. It was socially unacceptable and at that age it is not a good thing. You know children are cruel. They will point it out to you if you are poor and numerous people don't even have to use the word *poor* to make you aware of the fact that you are poor. On the upside my entire family was poor and all my cousins, so to us when we were together we were all comfortable because we were all the same. It was just interacting with people outside our family that would make my brothers and I feel . . . inferior.

Isabel lived in a low-income neighborhood for half her childhood, and she lived in a shack on a "ranch" owned by her grandfather for the other half.

We probably spent half my childhood living in the towns and city and the other half living in the country. So when I did have a neighborhood when we lived in the towns and cities, it was pretty much like living in the poor house. I remember the streets that we lived on that weren't paved even though we lived in the city. We had no sidewalks. When we would go to shop for school clothes we would be on the other side of town and it didn't look anything like that and so we knew we were poor then. When we lived in the country . . . my grandfather named a ranch, my mother's father. And when I tell people that they are like, "Oh wow" and they imagine it like a hacienda, but that ranch hasn't been operating since he passed away in the mid-'70s. It is just this big plot of land that is overgrown with brush and old buildings like an old house and an old barn. We did live there for a while, but that was because now that I am an adult I can understand this perfectly, but basically because our family was homeless, my

immediate family. What my father did was he went to my grandfather's ranch and he pretty much revamped this old log cabin that was there and we lived in it for about at least three years. We had no running water, no electricity.

The vivid descriptions of the impoverished backgrounds and neighborhoods of those from poor backgrounds contrast sharply with the descriptions of those who describe their upbringing as "solidly middle class." Those who grew up middle class became nostalgic when speaking about their *Leave It to Beaver* neighborhoods, which they primarily characterized as "safe" and "white," and where they were usually the only Mexican American family on the street. Vincent is a second-generation Mexican American whose father is an engineer. He explained that he was raised "solidly middle class, pretty much like whites." When I asked him to elaborate on being "solidly middle class," he replied, "We always had plenty of food and never had to worry about electricity or things like that. We were always very comfortable."

In sharp contrast to those who were raised in middle-class households where there was always plenty of food on the table and bills were always paid on time, the parents of those who were raised in poor households struggled to make ends meet. The more marginalized economic position of low-income households often results in premature entry into the labor force by 15- and second-generation youth who work to help families financially. A number of those who were raised in poor households worked while in high school or college and handed over their paychecks, or a portion of them, to help the family stay afloat, a finding that is in line with previous research that finds that low-income Mexican immigrant families must often rely on the labor of their children to make ends meet (Aguis Vallejo, Lee, and Zhou 2011; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011; Newman 2000; Ong and Terriquez 2008; Zhou et al. 2008). Leo is a 1.5 generation Mexican American with a master's degree in architecture who started working in junior high school. As he explained,

Growing up we all put money into the pot so when we all worked we all gave our paychecks to our father and he would give you an allowance based on what you earned and it was all distributed. . . . Growing up I didn't like that I had to work and give my whole check and only get forty bucks back. But I had to do it. It was a sacrifice that I had to do, I had to be part of the team and do it.

While those who grew up poor often had to work in high school and college to help support their families financially, none of those raised in middle-class

households worked to support their families. When they did work prematurely, it was often to earn extra money for personal wants, such as designer jeans or "going out." A few even received generous allowances. Vincent related:

They would give me money all throughout high school and early high school. When I was going to college and playing baseball I wasn't able to work at all and I had to pay a lot of gas and my parents gave me a hundred dollars a month, money for me to manage.

I expected that many successful Mexican Americans, especially the 1.5 and second generation, would hail from disadvantaged backgrounds. This finding was not a surprise because of the selectivity of Mexican immigrants, who are generally low-wage labor migrants and who face a marginalized entry status, factors that shape the social status and opportunities of their children. Because Mexican migration is generally a low-wage labor migration, I was initially surprised to find a noteworthy number of second-generation Mexican Americans who have parents with relatively low levels of education yet were able to provide middle-class lifestyles for their children. Two patterns became evident as to how some immigrant parents are able to lead a middle-class lifestyle. First, research shows that legal documentation has deep implications for occupational opportunities and the long-term social mobility of the first generation (Hernández-León 2008). Parental legal status was critical in promoting Karina Martínez's family into the middle class, a pattern also exemplified by Vincent, whose father also obtained legal documentation. Manuel, Vincent's father, migrated to the United States in his teens with his mother and four siblings when his father died. The family was able to obtain legal residency through Manuel's father, who had worked in the mining industry in San Diego. Manuel joined the military, where he trained as an engineer and learned skills that he was able to parlay into a successful career in California's booming 1970s aerospace industry even though he lacked a college degree.

Second, the significant majority of the second generation who grew up middle class have parents who built successful small businesses after they migrated to the United States, oftentimes servicing the ethnic community. These businesses include car lots, car repair services, construction companies, or retail stores. While observers have argued that entrepreneurship is not necessarily a viable route to upward mobility for the Mexican-origin population (Farlie and Woodruff 2008; Rajman and Tienda 2003; Sanders and Nee 1996), small business ownership provides parents with greater financial resources to

invest in their children, and it allows parents to buy their way out of low-income communities and establish residences in middle-class neighborhoods. This is one way in which the Mexican-origin middle class is different from the black middle class, who are more likely to remain in segregated neighborhoods that are in close proximity to inner-city communities because of a racially discriminatory housing market (Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo-McCoy 2000). For some first-generation parents with limited educational credentials, business ownership becomes a pragmatic strategy to achieving intragenerational mobility (mobility that occurs within a single generation) and securing the trappings of middle-class life. The critical mechanism underlying the first generation's intragenerational mobility stems from the economic opportunities that follow legal status.

Those with immigrant parents who were raised in middle-class households are more likely to have parents who entered the United States with legal status, or if they entered the United States without authorization, they were able to regularize their status shortly after arrival. A few claimed that their parents regularized their status through labor certification, but what is particularly notable is that more than half of the second generation raised in middle-class households claimed that their parents were able to legalize through the "baby clause" or *Silva Letters* as described in Chapter 2. As one of my respondents who grew up middle class exclaimed, "I was my parents' *anhor baby*!"<sup>23</sup> This legal status facilitates both intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. This research shows the importance of obtaining legal status early on in children's life-course trajectory because the financial returns allow for greater investment earlier in the life course and for a longer period of time leading to cumulative advantages that stem from better neighborhoods, middle-class schools, and middle-class peer networks.

While the 1.5 and second generation characterize their class backgrounds within a middle-class or poor dichotomy, the third- and fourth-generation respondents, regardless of whether they were raised in poor, low-income, or middle-class households, generally portray their families' mobility trajectories over the generations as the "typical immigrant story . . . just like the Irish and Italians," where each generation is doing better than the one before. Katir Ortega-Smith's tale is one of intergenerational mobility, where each generation surpasses the last in terms of income, education, and occupation. She is a fourth-generation Mexican American who grew up "lower middle class" in Riverside, a large, sprawling city just east of Los Angeles and Orange County.

Katie was raised in Colonia Casa Blanca, a segregated neighborhood that once a citrus worker village but is now a low-income and blue collar barrio composed of Mexican American families with long roots in the United States and more recent immigrant arrivals (G. González 1994). Katie's paternal grandfather fled Mexico with his family during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and found work in Riverside's orange groves while her great grandmother toiled in the packing house stuffing oranges into wooden crates emblazoned with bucolic renderings of perennially sunny Southern California. Katie's paternal grandfather and father were born and raised in Colonia Casa Blanca while her mother's family, also dating back several generations, settled in a different segregated neighborhood, Eastside, which also emerged from a concentration of citrus and produce workers. While Katie's great-grandparents labored in Southern California's booming citrus industry, her grandfather improved on his parents' elementary school education and occupation by graduating from high school and finding employment as a repairman for a large apartment complex, eventually working his way up to superintendent of all the properties owned by the firm. Katie's father, a third-generation Mexican American, improved on his father's education by attending two years of community college, although he dropped out when he was promoted to foreman of the construction company where he worked. Even though Katie's father did not graduate from college, his salary was enough to purchase a small California bungalow style home in Casa Blanca. Her mother, who only graduated from high school, worked sporadically in fast food or retail but was generally able to stay home with their three children. Katie explains that they were neither poor nor middle class, but lower middle class: "We never went without."

Katie's parents emphasized that a college degree was the key to moving up and out of Casa Blanca. She did well in high school and was accepted to, and graduated from, the University of California. Katie's brothers have also improved on their parents' education, occupation, and income. "My older brother is a geek, totally nerdy. He's American; that's how he identifies himself. He's Republican and he works for a division of NASA." Katie's younger brother also holds a college degree and is a regional sales manager. Three generations of Katie's family were raised in a segregated neighborhood with long sociohistorical roots in the United States dating back to the Mexican Revolution, yet each generation has improved on the education and occupation of the last. Although it has taken four generations, Katie holds a college degree, is residentially assimilated, and, consistent with the linear assimilation model,

which views intermarriage as the end point of assimilation, both she and her brother married Anglos. Many of the third- and fourth-generation respondents described a similar intergenerational mobility trajectory within their families of a slow but steady progression to socioeconomic assimilation over the generations.

As these case studies show, legal status is important in promoting intergenerational mobility and financial security among first-generation parents, the advantages of which stream down to children. Moreover, a legalization pathway that was once linked to the birth of a U.S. child has implications for public policy and debates about the utility of a pathway to legalization for unauthorized immigrants currently living in the country. This research also illuminates the extreme intergenerational mobility that can occur between an economically marginalized first generation and their 1.5- and second-generation adult children, the very population that is most feared to experience a downward mobility trajectory. Finally, my interviews with third- and fourth-generation middle-class Mexican Americans are in line with recent research demonstrating a pattern of intergenerational mobility that proceeds at a slow but steady pace over the generations (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003; Jiménez 2010).

### Pathways to Educational Mobility

As I have demonstrated, the class backgrounds of successful Mexican Americans are not uniform. Some grow up middle class, while others grow up in poor or lower middle-class households. How do those raised in poor households enter the middle class? Some socially mobile Mexican Americans forge a pathway into the middle class through business ownership, especially those who lack a college degree. Business ownership is a strategy to circumvent disadvantages in the labor market that emerge from not having gone to college. The reasons underlying the inability to obtain a college degree are structural. For example, Andrea earned a full scholarship to a small liberal arts college, but she had to drop out after one year to help support her family financially when her father fell ill and was unable to work. She eventually started a business because she grew tired of being passed over for promotions at her place of employment because she did not have a college degree. She now owns a successful employee staffing company.

While some enter the middle class through business ownership, the significant majority of those raised in poor households, regardless of generation,



enter the middle class through higher education. A large body of research concentrates on the mechanisms that lead to educational failure among minorities. But what leads to success? Understanding the mechanisms that promote educational achievement among the Mexican American population is of critical importance because the Mexican-origin population has the lowest levels of education of any racial or ethnic group in the United States.

While laypersons might be quick to explain away Mexican Americans' relatively low levels of education by espousing the tired argument that Mexican "culture" simply does not value education, research has shown that the structural position of racial or ethnic groups shapes access to educational resources and cultural capital and is correlated with lower, or higher, levels of educational attainment among racial or ethnic minorities and immigrants (Bourdieu 1977; DiMaggio 1982; Lareau 2003; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Those born and raised in middle- or upper-class families have more favorable educational opportunities, which translate into better labor market outcomes, than those born into low-income or poor families (Conley 1999; Hout and Beller 2006). Moreover, schools mirror the class system of larger society and actively maintain class and racial or ethnic inequalities in education (Bowles and Gintis 1977; Coleman et al. 1966; Rist 1970). Microprocesses within schools, such as racial or ethnic discrimination, teachers' lowered expectations of minority youth, and the likelihood that minority youth, especially boys, are tracked into the non-college-bound vocational track, shape larger patterns of educational attainment among minorities (Carter 2005; Ford 1998; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; R. C. Smith 2002; Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Mexican Americans who are raised in low-income households have limited financial capital, and the neighborhoods in which they are raised exhibit the injurious conditions of the inner city, including crime, lack of social and public services, and subpar schools, leading us to expect that they may not surpass the social status of their parents as the status attainment and segmented assimilation models predict. Mexican immigrant parents typically migrate with low levels of education and are unfamiliar with how higher education works in the United States. They are often unable to help their children with homework assignments or special projects, even in elementary school, because of their limited English ability and low levels of education. Middle-class parents in this study have more resources to overcome these obstacles if they are present, but low-income parents do not. As Zeke, a 1.5 generation Mexican American explained,

My mom was very, very interested in our school work but she only went through the sixth grade. My dad only went to the third grade. I realize now looking back that my mom's way of helping us was just encouragement. But we really didn't know anything about study habits. I have an encyclopedia that I saved. Our encyclopedia was one from 1955 and that was our reference. That's what we had. I saved it just because it means a lot to me. So if I had to look up stuff it was in that encyclopedia because I couldn't ask my parents.

Like Zeke, nearly all of the respondents, regardless of class background and generation, stressed that their parents expected them to go to college. In fact, a number of respondents related that a college education was their parents' dream: "It's why they moved us here, for education"; "My mom wanted me to dream: 'It's why they didn't have'; "My dad is very smart, a big reader, but he didn't have chances she didn't have"; "My dad is very smart, a big reader, but he didn't finish elementary school. It was a dream for me to go to college"; "My parents' dream was that we had to get a degree so we didn't have to labor like them." While parents have high aspirations for their children, they generally have no or limited knowledge of the "culture of college," which includes access to college preparatory classes and AP classes and the importance of extracurricular activities in building a precollege résumé. Parents also are unaware that preparing for, and taking, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is a precondition for applying to a four-year university, and they lack information on the availability of financial aid and scholarships to defray college tuition costs.

Those who grow up middle class in the 1.5 and second generation also generally have parents with low levels of education who do not necessarily know how to navigate the education labyrinth, but they are able to bridge this parental knowledge gap by attending middle-class schools where a culture of college is built into the curriculum. Those who are raised in more affluent households also reap the benefits associated with living in middle-class neighborhoods, such as access to professional networks and institutions that help build the cultural capital that is valued in mainstream institutions (Bourdieu 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1977; Lareau 2003; Roscigno 1998). For example, Nicole, who was raised in a middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles and who is now a partner of an accounting firm, explained that although her parents were successful restaurateurs, they knew little about how one actually goes about applying for college. "They encouraged me to ask my teachers and friends. They knew they could help me in ways they couldn't." Indeed, Nicole learned from her two best friends, who were white with college-educated parents, about the

SAT, and she accompanied one of the families on a tour of several University of California campuses, one of which she decided to attend. Similarly, Karina, introduced in the chapter's opening vignette, explained,

Living in a middle-class neighborhood, you are around other people who are going to college and doing these things. You see their parents working in professional jobs. It is what you do. If you are applying [for college] you ask your friends for help and that is what you do. When you are around other people who are doing it and who have done it that's just what you do.

For those who grow up in middle-class neighborhoods, greater financial and cultural capital, combined with the social and cultural capital obtained through middle-class schools and peer networks, greatly facilitates educational mobility. Middle-class parents in this study also have more financial resources to invest in their children's educational mobility. Those resources include private school tuition and the ability to pay for tutors and other extracurricular activities such as music lessons, sports, and field trips.

Growing up in middle-class neighborhoods and having greater financial resources open the educational door for Mexican Americans. How, then, do some adult children of low-skilled, low-level workers who grow up in low-income neighborhoods, who lack financial capital and middle-class cultural capital, become psychologists, lawyers, vice presidents of corporations, engineers, and financial analysts, jobs that require high levels of education? First, as the opening vignette demonstrates in Brenda's case, educational tracking into GATE and AP classes is a mechanism that sets low-income Mexican Americans on a path to college attendance. In Patricia Gandara's (1995) study of low-income Mexican Americans who attend highly selective universities, nearly all of the subjects had been tracked into college preparatory classes in high school. Similarly, more than two thirds of those I interviewed who were raised in low-income households were tracked into GATE or AP classes or bused to middle-class schools outside their neighborhoods. These respondents were the most likely to attend more selective University of California campuses or Ivy League universities right out of high school. Pablo, introduced earlier, explained that the racial and ethnic composition of his neighborhood, and his elementary school, was

Latinos Latinos Latinos! Mexican Mexican Mexican! Poor. And some Asians, but mainly Mexican, 90 percent Mexican. There [were] really no white people

and no Caucasians or whatever you want to call them and really no African Americans, just a couple [of] Asians. Mainly Chinese and Mexicans.

Pablo did not know that he attended a subpar school until he was hand-picked by one of his teachers to test for a new magnet program held at an upper-middle-class elementary and junior high school in largely prosperous Glendale, a city in the San Fernando Valley. Pablo passed the exam with flying colors. Starting in the fifth grade, he awoke at five each morning and took a forty-five-minute bus ride to and from Glendale. He immediately noticed the school was very different from the one he left behind in Lincoln Heights.

When I got there I was like in a different world. It was a different school . . . just by the way people acted, dressed, [and] talked and the way they communicated. Just like the competition was incredible. People would fight for A's and B's. I mean they would just bicker over grades.

Pablo left the magnet program after eighth grade and returned to Los Angeles to attend a local urban high school. Because he did well at the magnet school, Pablo was tracked into a "one-of-a-kind university set-up program," which guaranteed college admission and a full scholarship to students who maintained a 3.5 GPA. Pablo applied to elite universities up and down the California coast but decided to attend UCLA so that he could remain close to home. By the time he entered college, his father had passed away and his younger brother had been initiated into the local gang. Like many middle-class Mexican Americans in this study, Pablo is the first in his family to graduate with a college degree, and a middle-class pioneer. His case points to the power of educational tracking and the divergent mobility trajectories that can occur within some families. As in Brenda Guerrero's case, Pablo's younger brother was not tracked into an accelerated program and attended the local elementary and junior high schools, where he too was labeled as a troublemaker. While Pablo was working toward a college degree, his younger brother dropped out of high school and was shot and killed in a skirmish with a rival gang.<sup>4</sup>

Brenda Guerrero's and Pablo's experiences demonstrate the paradoxical nature of educational tracking and AP classes. As the education psychologist Patricia Gandara (1995) found in her study of high-achieving Mexican Americans from low-income backgrounds, curriculum tracking provides opportunities by placing low-income Mexican American students in a college-bound peer group that is "cocooned" from lower-achieving peers. Tracking also exposes

low-income Mexican Americans to the information they need to gain access to college and provides them with the academic background to apply for and attend selective universities, which regularly award more "points" in the admissions process to students who have taken AP classes (Birdman 2000). What is ironic is that tracking can also negatively affect students, as is evidenced by Brenda's and Pablo's younger brothers who were labeled and tracked as troublemakers from an early age and who have not achieved similar levels of success. Of course it is impossible to know whether Brenda's and Pablo's brothers would have gone on to college if they had been tracked into GATE, AP classes, or high school programs that guarantee a college education, or whether Brenda and Pablo would still have achieved the same rapid rise into the middle class if they had not been tracked into GATE and AP classes. Nevertheless, previous research has demonstrated that teachers act as institutional gatekeepers when they assess students and determine their eligibility for gifted programs, college prep, or AP class, or conversely when elementary school teachers slot Latino students into special education classes that place them on a course of remedial education throughout junior high and high school, a pattern that is more prevalent among Latino boys, resulting in gendered outcomes in educational attainment among Latinos (N. Lopez 2002; R. C. Smith 2002).

Tracking systems are cumulative, and begin at the elementary school level, when students are placed in accelerated or slower groups and classes (Rowan and Miracle 1983). The longer students stay in one track, the harder it is to move into another (Gandara 1995), and by junior high their educational trajectory has generally been determined (Kershaw 1992). The problem with tracking is that low-income black and Latino students are generally perceived by teachers as having less academic ability than white students and students from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately tracked into non-college curriculum and vocational tracks (Oakes 1986). While tracking is a mechanism that leads to positive educational outcomes for some Mexican Americans who grow up poor, it is also a mechanism in which race, class, and gender intersect and which creates different opportunity structures that reproduce the racial hierarchy and exacerbate the education gap (R. C. Smith 2002; J. P. Smith 2006).

Mentors are the second critical mechanism in advancing the educational mobility of those who grow up in low-income neighborhoods. Low-income Mexican Americans cannot rely on parents for financial or cultural capital when it comes to applying for and attending college, and they generally lack

access to middle-class mentors who can guide them and direct them into professional networks. For example, in her study of Mexican-origin and Japanese-origin high schoolers, sociologist Maria Eugenia Matute-Bianchi (1986) found that even the most achievement-oriented Mexican-origin youth have limited knowledge of how to pursue high-status, high-paying careers in the primary labor market. Individual family members, especially parents, are engaged in low-wage and low-status occupations and lack access to professionals in their familial and larger social networks. Mexican students' role models were more likely to be adults in the community. Matute-Bianchi discovered, whereas Japanese immigrants were more likely to have relatives who are visible and intimate role models engaged in the professions within the family network. In this vein, researchers examining the exceptional educational outcomes of the children of immigrants or disadvantaged minorities who "beat the odds" in terms of educational attainment find that mentors or "significant others"—teachers, counselors, friends, or siblings—increase Mexican Americans' social capital and are an important mechanism that advances educational attainment, as does knowing doctors, lawyers, or teachers (Levine and Nodder 1996; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009; R. C. Smith 2008; Telles and Ortiz 2008). I also find that mentors are crucial in bridging the middle-class cultural and human capital gaps that are present in poor families. Mentors provide access to knowledge, information, and connections, resources that those who grow up middle class have access to by virtue of their class status.

Poor Mexican American youth come into contact with "significant others," or educational mentors (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009), in three primary ways. The first is through outside programs that provide educational support to students from low-income families. These outside programs may or may not be geared exclusively to Latinos. As Mateo, a lawyer and second-generation Mexican American, explained,

My mentors taught me so much about things that I couldn't read about or learn from my own father because his experience was limited. The ins and outs of society and the workforce and different opportunities that exist. I wanted to go to UCLA, but I had no knowledge about how to apply to college and neither did my parents. I always assumed that I couldn't afford college. I couldn't perceive how my parents would have the money. My senior year, a counselor asked me, "what are you going to do?" I said, "I guess I'm going to go to community college." And one weekend I attended a retreat given by the Chicano

students' association. An attorney speak when still practicing law and he went there to encourage Hispanic students to be a lawyer. After I heard this guy talk it had such an impact on me I was like, I want to be like him. I always remember that it was that one person who changed my life in terms of a career.

The Latino lawyer whom Mateo "serendipitously" met at the retreat not only acted as a role model by showing Mateo what was possible; he also took Mateo under his wing and helped him apply to college and, later, law schools. Thus, outside programs provide adolescents with a broader view of schools and colleges, and mentors and program staff act as cultural brokers by providing tools and long-term support that help minority youth negotiate institutions outside inner-city communities, such as selective colleges (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1991; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2009; R. C. Smith 2008).

The second way in which disadvantaged Mexican American youth come into contact with mentors is through their parents' employers. This occurs among those with parents who work low-wage immigrant jobs in the informal economy, chiefly through mothers who are domestic workers. Although these jobs can be fraught with interethnic conflict (Hondaguri-Sotelo 2001), mothers in these jobs build long-term relationships with their upper-middle-class white clientele, and they often bring their children to work with them, especially during summers or school vacations. This places Mexican American youth in "another world" and provides them with middle-class and professional contacts.

Geena exemplifies this pattern. Her father was a lawyer in Mexico and her mother worked at the firm as a secretary. Geena was raised by her single mother until her mother decided to join her extended family in Los Angeles when Geena was five years old. Geena then lived with her maternal grandmother because her mother worked as a live-in housekeeper, cleaning the mansions that dot the Hollywood hills and caring for other people's children there. Maggie would return home and visit her daughter on the weekends, and Geena would live with her in palatial mansions during the summers, where she would "enjoy the perks of those families, swimming in the pools, driving in the Mercedes and Rolls Royces." Geena attended a low-income urban school but was tracked into GATE classes. She always knew she wanted to be a lawyer, an aspiration that did not seem out of reach considering the cultural memory of her father's occupation. Although she never knew her father, and although she and her mother were now poor, her mother's occasional tales of her father's success

and stature were a source of pride and a motivating force. Shaped by Geena's own aspirations (Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Gandara 1995). While Geena's ambition and educational successes placed her on a track of educational achievement, she had no idea what applying to law school entailed. The most critical mechanism that helped her fulfill her goals was the intervention of her mother's white employer, a successful Hollywood lawyer, setting her on a rapid educational and occupational trajectory. As Geena recalled:

Something kind of interesting or funny is that the family that my mom is working for since maybe 1988, he is a pretty successful attorney in. He's got his firm and all of that. In high school in maybe my sophomore or junior year, he asked my mom, "What is she thinking of doing?" and my mom said, "She wants to be a lawyer, like her dad." So he told her that he'd like to talk to me. So I went to meet with him and I was really nervous and he was very nice and basically I started talking to him, and I basically didn't know you had to go to college before you go to law school. He was wonderful, he was like a mentor and he told me what I had to do, he set me up, he knew a lot of people that knew a lot of people, whatever. I ended up being able to meet with a college counselor that was a good friend of his; he kind of helped me by going through my statement, my applications and things like that. So he is a USC alumni, so I got accepted into a few schools; he was very happy that I got into USC.

Geena earned straight A's at USC while working part time on campus to help pay her tuition and living expenses. However, during her second year at USC, the department in which she worked part-time cut the student workers' hours and Geena was out of a job. She drove her mother to work one morning and subsequently ran into her mentor, who questioned why she was not at work.

I told him that I lost my job and I was going to try to find another job. He left his office and a couple of hours later he called and said, "Can you work at my computer?" I said, "Of course I can." So he asked, "Would you want to work at my firm?" and I said, "Yes." So a week later . . . I was there. Yes, things happen; sometimes you don't know why things happen. So I think that the beginning of that school year, I started at his firm and later on I found out that he really didn't mind anybody [laughing]. But I was there until I started law school, so for three or almost four years. It was great to work there; everybody was super nice because they didn't know my background, and they didn't know who I was really. They didn't know that I was his housekeeper's daughter; they just

knew she is a daughter of a friend, and that makes all the difference. I was their little baby for four years. It was great; I had all the honors I wanted or didn't. The summers were great. One summer I went to DC to intern—that was a nonpaid internship for a while and they all kind of put together money for me to be paid. Me wanting to be a lawyer to get that exposure, to get that level of comfort around rich attorneys. To me, I was comfortable in certain environments growing up. . . . At the same time it gave me more confidence because I was respected by these people; you know I was going to Christmas parties and hanging out with them, things like that. He would always tell me that he wanted this to help me. He is a great, great wonderful man. He has taken me as something of a project or something like that.

While Geena may have eventually figured out the necessary steps to apply for college and law school, her mother's Anglo employer became a conduit to an instantly rich source of social and cultural capital at a crucial time in her educational trajectory. As her mentor's "project," Geena has been able to continuously draw on him for advice, and she has gained entrée to an elite network of professionals who helped her secure a job at a high-profile firm.

Finally, some respondents who were raised in poor households also explained that their older siblings who had gone through college themselves acted as educational mentors. For example, Alejandra and Martha Calvo are sisters who were raised in a low-income area of Santa Ana. Alejandra was brought to the United States as a young child, and the family remained unauthorized until Martha was born, when their parents adjusted their status under the "baby clause." Their parents, both of whom have less than an elementary education, constantly emphasized the importance of obtaining an education. As Alejandra, the eldest, remembers, "My family for some odd reason would tell us that they would break their backs, but you just needed to get your degrees. . . . They said the biggest satisfaction they would get is for us to have our degree. So that constant reminder that they were working so hard for us so we could become something, that would be the biggest satisfaction for them." Alejandra was focused on attending college, but she had no idea how to make her parents' dream a reality. She was not tracked into the AP classes and she received no assistance from the counselors at her urban high school. After graduating from high school, Alejandra enrolled at the local community college and eventually transferred to the local California State University campus. Although she is thankful of the education she received, she wished

she would have had the opportunity to attend an Ivy League school, something she pushed her younger sister, Martha, to do.

My younger sister attended Brown, an Ivy League school, and she is the one who reaped the benefits of my knowledge. I like to take some credit in that I told her to apply. I helped her with her applications, I told her she needed to leave. So I have to take that credit. She went back east and she called one time and she was crying and told me she didn't belong there. She told me it was my entire fault, but I think it benefited her in the end.

[AV: It was important for you to see her go to a better school?]

A: Well, I thought I couldn't do it right after [high school] . . . I will be very honest. I didn't have someone push me, I was very insecure about my skill set. I knew I couldn't get into an Ivy League school. I didn't think I was that smart in the class, I know I wasn't scored with the gifted children. I think in the back of my mind I was doubting my skill set because I saw smart kids in the class all the time. I had a high "B" average, or a 3.2 GPA in high school. I went to community college and I thought I can't just leave; it will be really hard on my mom. My sister was in elementary and my little brother was two years old. I didn't like that somebody needed to stay back and help them out a little bit, so I couldn't leave.

Martha, interviewed at a different point in time, corroborated Alejandra's claim that she was an important mentor. "I would say that my older siblings, Alejandra and Jon, were key in laying the foundation so that I could follow a solid, strong college-bound path in high school." Others spoke of how their older siblings helped with their college applications, assisted in filling out financial aid forms, and advised them of which classes to take to complete a competitive application. More simply, older siblings also act as role models by demonstrating that a college education is attainable. Recent studies have also demonstrated the importance of older siblings in "showing the ropes" to low-income Mexican Americans (Bette 2003; Gandara 1995; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009). Particularly noteworthy is that socially mobile first-born Mexican Americans in this study are also an important source of financial capital for their younger siblings' education. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, socially mobile middle-class Mexican Americans often pay for costly private school tuition for their younger siblings, especially if their parents continue to live in inner-city neighborhoods. They purchase computers and books for their siblings, and they constantly help them with homework.

### Conclusion

Middle-class Mexican Americans appear similar on paper in terms of their middle-class attributes, but their class backgrounds diverge, an important difference that is concealed in large-scale survey research. Some Mexican Americans' backgrounds are steeped in middle-class privilege where they reap the benefits associated with higher parental incomes stemming from their parents' high-paying jobs or successful entrepreneurial endeavors. The advantages associated with growing up middle class include living in middle-class neighborhoods and attending middle-class schools, which provide youth with the social and cultural capital that is critical for higher educational attainment. The underlying mechanism that allows some immigrant families to gain a foothold in the middle class is parental legal status.

While some grew up middle class, the majority of successful Mexican Americans I interviewed, especially those in the 1.5 and second generation, grew up in poverty and achieved extreme rates of intergenerational mobility relative to their parents and much of their kin. They were raised in long-established, low-income ethnic communities or *colonias* by parents who toiled in low-wage immigrant jobs. The majority attained social mobility through higher education; however, some moved up the corporate ladder even though they lacked a college degree, and others followed a pathway into the middle class through entrepreneurship. Overall, middle-class Mexicans' social mobility trajectories offset the widespread pessimism that the entirety of the Mexican American population is following a pathway of downward, or stunted, assimilation.

The status attainment model, where parental income and education predicts the education of children, helps to partly explain the success of those raised in middle-class households, especially because higher parental incomes lead to middle-class neighborhoods and high-quality schools. However, this model does not explain the high levels of educational and occupational attainment achieved by those with poor and low-educated parents. The role of educational tracking, outside programs, and access to mentors cannot be overstated in helping to explain how some Mexican Americans from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve rapid intergenerational and social mobility and gain entry into the middle class. GATE, AP courses, and outside programs geared toward college are critical in providing adolescents with a broader view of schools and other mainstream institutions, and they help fill the gaps in educational knowledge and professional networks that exist within low-income

families. Outside programs are also important because they link low-income Mexican Americans to mentors and provide information about financial aid that makes college aspirations a reality. Professional mentors and older siblings also help fill gaps in resources and networks by providing social and cultural capital that low-income parents often lack. Together, these mechanisms advance educational and occupational attainment and ultimately entry into the middle class.

Scholars would expect the economically successful Mexican Americans detailed in this chapter to follow a traditional pathway of assimilation where they incorporate into the white middle class. Do middle-class Mexican Americans assimilate as middle-class whites, or might there be an additional pathway into the middle class? The remaining chapters of this book elucidate the ways in which class background—growing up poor or middle class—shapes the lived experiences of successful Mexican Americans and their incorporation pathways into the middle class.